

Jeremiah 50: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Jeremiah chapter 50. The word that the Lord spoke concerning Babylon, concerning the land of the Chaldeans, by Jeremiah the prophet. Declare among the nations and proclaim, set up a banner and proclaim, conceal it not and say, Babylon is taken, Bel is put to shame, Merodach is dismayed, her images are put to shame, her idols are dismayed.

For out of the north a nation has come up against her, which shall make her land a desolation, and none shall dwell in it, both man and beast shall flee away. In those days and in that time, declares the Lord, the people of Israel and the people of Judah shall come together, weeping as they come, and they shall seek the Lord their God.

They shall ask the way to Zion with faces turned toward it, saying, Come, let us join ourselves to the Lord in an everlasting covenant that will never be forgotten. My people have been lost sheep, their shepherds have led them astray, turning them away on the mountains.

From mountain to hill they have gone, they have forgotten their fold. All who found them have devoured them, and their enemies have said, We are not guilty, for they have sinned against the Lord, their habitation of righteousness, the Lord, the hope of their fathers.

Flee from the midst of Babylon, and go out of the land of the Chaldeans, and be as male goats before the flock. For behold, I am stirring up and bringing against Babylon a gathering of great nations from the north country, and they shall array themselves against her.

[1 : 29] From there she shall be taken. Their arrows are like a skilled warrior who does not return empty-handed. Chaldea shall be plundered. All who plunder her shall be sated, declares the Lord.

Though you rejoice, though you exult, O plunderers of my heritage, though you frolic like a heifer in the pasture, and neigh like stallions, your mother shall be utterly shamed, and she who bore you shall be disgraced.

Behold, she shall be the last of the nations, a wilderness, a dry land, and a desert. Because of the wrath of the Lord she shall not be inhabited, but shall be in utter desolation.

Everyone who passes by Babylon shall be appalled, and hiss because of all her wounds. Set yourselves in array against Babylon all around, all you who bend the bow.

Shoot at her, spare no arrows, for she has sinned against the Lord. Raise a shout against her all around, she has surrendered. Her bulwarks have fallen, her walls are thrown down.

[2 : 26] For this is the vengeance of the Lord. Take vengeance on her, do to her as she has done. Cut off from Babylon the sower, and the one who handles the sickle in time of harvest.

Because of the sword of the oppressor, everyone shall turn to his own people, and everyone shall flee to his own land. Israel is a hunted sheep, driven away by lions.

First the king of Assyria devoured him, and now at last Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon has gnawed his bones. Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I am bringing punishment on the king of Babylon and his land, as I punished the king of Assyria.

I will restore Israel to his pasture, and he shall feed on Carmel and Ibassion, and his desire shall be satisfied on the hills of Ephraim and in Gilead. In those days and in that time, declares the Lord, Iniquity shall be sought in Israel, and there shall be none, and sin in Judah, and none shall be found.

For I will pardon those whom I leave as a remnant. Go up against the land of Merathæim, and against the inhabitants of Picard. Kill and devote them to destruction, declares the Lord, and do all that I have commanded you.

[3 : 36] The noise of battle is in the land, and great destruction. How the hammer of the whole earth is cut down and broken! How Babylon has become a horror among the nations! I set a snare for you, and you were taken, O Babylon, and you did not know it.

You were found and caught, because you opposed the Lord. The Lord has opened his armory, and brought out the weapons of his wrath. For the Lord of hosts has a work to do in the land of the Chaldeans.

Come against her from every quarter, open her granaries, pile her up like heaps of grain, and devote her to destruction. Let nothing be left of her. Kill all her bulls, let them go down to the slaughter.

Woe to them, for their day has come, the time of their punishment. A voice! They flee and escape from the land of Babylon, to declare in Zion the vengeance of the Lord our God, vengeance for his temple.

Summon archers against Babylon, all those who bend the bow. In camp around her, let no one escape. Repay her according to her deeds. Do to her according to all that she has done.

[4 : 39] For she has proudly defied the Lord, the Holy One of Israel. Therefore her young men shall fall in her squares, and all her soldiers shall be destroyed on that day, declares the Lord.

Behold, I am against you, O proud one, declares the Lord God of hosts. For your day has come, the time when I will punish you. The proud one shall stumble and fall, with none to raise him up.

And I will kindle a fire in his cities, and it will devour all that is around him. Thus says the Lord of hosts, The people of Israel are oppressed, and the people of Judah with them.

All who took them captive have held them fast. They refuse to let them go. Their Redeemer is strong. The Lord of hosts is his name. He will surely plead their cause, that he may give rest to the earth, but unrest to the inhabitants of Babylon.

A sword against the Chaldeans, declares the Lord, and against the inhabitants of Babylon, and against her officials and her wise men. A sword against the diviners, that they may become fools.

[5 : 39] A sword against her warriors, that they may be destroyed. A sword against her horses, and against her chariots, and against all the foreign troops in her midst, that they may become women.

A sword against all her treasures, that they may be plundered. A drought against her waters, that they may be dried up. For it is a land of images, and they are mad over idols.

Therefore wild beasts shall dwell with hyenas in Babylon, and ostriches shall dwell in her. She shall never again have people, nor be inhabited for all generations. As when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and their neighbouring cities, declares the Lord, so no man shall dwell there, and no son of man shall sojourn in her.

Behold, a people comes from the north. A mighty nation and many kings are stirring from the farthest parts of the earth. They lay hold of bow and spear. They are cruel and have no mercy.

The sound of them is like the roaring of the sea. They ride on horses, arrayed as a man for battle, against you, O daughter of Babylon. The king of Babylon heard the report of them, and his hands fell helpless.

[6 : 44] Anguish seized him, pain as of a woman in labour. Behold, like a lion coming up from the thicket of the Jordan, against a perennial pasture, I will suddenly make them run away from her, and I will appoint over her whomever I choose.

For who is like me? Who will summon me? What shepherd can stand before me? Therefore hear the plan that the Lord has made against Babylon, and the purposes that he has formed against the land of the Chaldeans.

Surely the little ones of their flock shall be dragged away. Surely their foals shall be appalled at their fate. At the sound of the capture of Babylon, the earth shall tremble, and her cries shall be heard among the nations.

Throughout, the book of Jeremiah has told of the coming disaster from the north, a disaster that, after 605 BC and the victory of Nebuchadnezzar over the Egyptians at Carchemish, comes into clearer focus as that of Babylon.

Now, finally, in chapters 50 and 51, in a lengthy series of prophecies, Babylon's own coming doom is announced. These chapters are a gathering of many different words delivered against Babylon, which serve as the climax of the Lord's judgment upon the world.

[7 : 56] This judgment had been anticipated back at another hinge of the book, in Jeremiah chapter 25, verses 11 to 12. This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon 70 years.

Then, after 70 years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, declares the Lord, making the land an everlasting waste.

In chapter 25, this is followed by an account of the nations to whom Jeremiah must give the cup of the wrath of the Lord. Babylon is the last to drink. In the book of Jeremiah, Jeremiah often seems to be in a position of treachery.

In his instruction to people to submit to the yoke of the king of Babylon, the rule of Babylon seems to be identified with the rule of the Lord. Submitting to the Lord requires submitting to the king of Babylon.

This raises theological tensions that pervade the book, and at this point we see something of a resolution of them. Babylon is not finally identified with the Lord's purpose when the Lord has finished using Babylon as his means of judging the people of the region.

[9 : 03] He will then judge Babylon itself. The Lord judging the instruments of his judgment can be seen in places like Isaiah chapter 10 verses 5 to 15, in that case concerning Assyria.

Woe to Assyria, the rod of my anger, the staff in their hands is my fury. Against a godless nation I sent him, and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets.

But he does not so intend, and his heart does not so think. But it is in his heart to destroy, and to cut off nations, not a few. For he says, Are not my commanders all kings?

Is not Calno like Carchemish? Is not Hamath like Arpat? Is not Samaria like Damascus? As my hand has reached to the kingdoms of the idols, whose carved images were greater than those of Jerusalem and Samaria.

Shall I not do to Jerusalem and her idols, as I have done to Samaria and her images? When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the speech of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria, and the boastful look in his eyes.

[10:10] For he says, By my strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I have understanding, I remove the boundaries of people and plunder their treasures. Like a bull I bring down those who sit on thrones.

My hand has found like a nest the wealth of the peoples, and as one gathers eggs that have been forsaken, so I have gathered all the earth, and there was none that moved a wing, or opened the mouth, or chirped.

Shall the axe boast over him who hews with it, or the saw magnify itself against him who wields it? As if a rod should wield him who lifts it, or as if a staff should lift him who is not wood.

While Jeremiah's stance may have seemed to have been simplistically pro-Babylonian, seeming to mark him out as a traitor at certain points, at this point, everything comes into a clearer focus.

Jack Lumbum remarks that the judgments here are far more general in contrast to the prophecies against Moab, for instance. Babylon was the greatest city of Chaldea in southern Mesopotamia, situated on the river Euphrates, not too far from modern-day Baghdad.

[11:16] Babylonia named the region around the Tigris and Euphrates, from Babylon in the north down to the Persian Gulf in the south. Babylon first makes its appearance in the scriptures back in the book of Genesis, as Babel is introduced as the beginning of the kingdom of Nimrod in the land of Shinar, where the tower and the city of Babel are later built.

In Genesis, Babel is a backdrop for the calling of Abram, who, we ought to recall, is called from the general region of Babel, from Ur of the Chaldees. The city of Babylon looms larger than life in the scriptural imagination.

Like many of the other nations mentioned in the list of nations to be judged, Babylon was a foil against which Israel's own identity had been formed. The Neo-Babylonian Empire was closely associated with the Chaldeans, and the Babylonians are routinely called Chaldeans in Jeremiah.

However, Nabonidus, the next great king of Babylon, after the brief reigns of a few successors to Nebuchadnezzar, was Aramean from Haran, rather than Chaldean. Babylon was invaded by Cyrus the Great in 539 BC, who ruled over the Persian Achaemenid Empire.

This would lead to the end of exile for Jerusalem. Jeremiah is charged in anticipation to announce the downfall of Babylon, and the defeat of its god. Just as the defeat of Ammon was the defeat of Milcom, or the defeat of Moab was the defeat of Chemosh, so the defeat of Babylon is the defeat of Bel or Meridak.

[12:42] Bel and Meridak are the same god. Bel was the chief of the Babylonian pantheon, another form of the name Baal, and a way of referring to the god Enlil. Meridak is a form of the term Marjuk, a deity famous for his victory over Tiamat in Babylonian creation mythology.

In the Enumer Elish, Marjuk kills Tiamat, a symbol of the primeval chaos waters, and forms the heaven and the earth from her divided body. However, now the great god Marjuk is put to shame.

His land is being despoiled and made desolate. To this point in the book of Jeremiah, we have been told again and again of an enemy coming from the north. And now the enemy that comes from the north, Babylon, faces its own enemy from the north.

A nation will come upon her from her north. What it has done to others, others will do to it. And as Babylon is brought down, the flock of Judah and Israel will be restored.

The Lord describes the condition of his people. Their shepherds had failed them. The kings and the priests had not led them as they ought to have done. And as a result, the people had been scattered. Their fold had been destroyed.

[13 : 49] And they had been sent abroad to all different mountains and hills. They had been devoured by wild beasts and enemies. However, the Lord, as the true shepherd of his people, is going to gather them again.

Here we should recall the prophecy of Jeremiah chapter 23, verses 1 to 4. Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture, declares the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people, you have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them.

Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the Lord. Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply.

I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed. Neither shall any be missing, declares the Lord. As the Babylonians and others have despoiled and destroyed and devoured the flock of the Lord, they have thought themselves innocent on account of the people's sin.

The Babylonians seem to have some sense of the theology of Judah, and the way in which they are being judged for their sin. We see this in Jeremiah chapter 40 verse 2 to 3. The captain of the guard took Jeremiah and said to him, The Lord your God pronounced this disaster against this place.

[15 : 07] The Lord has brought it about, and has done as he said. Because you sinned against the Lord, and did not obey his voice, this thing has come upon you. However, these devourers of the flock will be held accountable.

The Lord instructs the remnant of his flock to flee from the midst of Babylon and out of the land of the Chaldeans. For a scattered flock, they will need new leaders. The Lord here speaks of male goats before the flock, new leaders who will arise from the midst of the Jewish community in exile and lead them back to the land.

For Babylon and the Chaldeans, however, their future involves becoming a prey of other nations. Just as they have preyed upon Judah, so they will be made the prey of other peoples.

The plundering nation of Babylon is compared to a frolicking heifer or a lusty stallion. These are animals defined by their power and their desire. In the same way, Babylon has been defined by its might and its proud sense of a lack of any limitations upon its desires.

However, this fertile and prosperous and powerful land will soon be put to shame and made desolate and waste. The Lord will strip her of her inhabitants and make her an object of scorn among the nations.

[16 : 17] Once again, we have a passage in which the Lord summons people to battle. This time, though, it's not the Babylonians. It's the enemies of the Babylonians, who are called to come upon her and utterly destroy her.

Whereas earlier Judah was described as a flock that had been failed by its shepherds and led astray and scattered and then devoured by wild beasts, in verses 17 to 20, the imagery changes somewhat.

Israel is a hunted sheep and rather than focus upon the failure of the shepherds, the focus is upon the external threat of the lions. These lions are the great imperial powers that have dominated the region over the last 200 years.

The Neo-Assyrian Empire and then the Neo-Babylonian Empire. The Neo-Assyrian Empire under Tiglath-Pileser III had removed much of the northern kingdom of Israel, especially the two and a half tribes in the region of Transjordan, after they were appealed to by Ahaz of Judah against Pekah the son of Remaliah.

Around 720 BC, Sargon II finished the job, destroying Samaria and wiping out the northern kingdom, deporting much of its population. Sennacherib had also threatened Jerusalem in 701 BC, although Jerusalem had been spared at that point under Hezekiah.

[17 : 33] Although Judah had escaped the Assyrians, they had not escaped the Babylonians. Nebuchadnezzar had come upon them in 597 BC, in 586 BC, and then had deported even further remnants in 582 BC.

The Lord is going to bring judgment upon this lion of Babylon, just as he brought judgment upon Assyria. The Babylonians and the Medes had defeated the Assyrians in 609 BC, spelling the end of their empire and the rise of Babylon in their place.

But now Babylon's turn has come, and the Lord is going to regather his people. He will restore Israel and Judah to their pasture. They will be brought back to the land, and not just to the place of Judah, but also to Ephraim and Gilead in the Transjordan.

Beyond this restoration to the land, the Lord will deal with the deeper problem, the problem of their sin. The people to be restored to the land will be a faithful people in a way that they were not before.

They will also be a forgiven people. Their old sins will not be brought to mind again. After the return from the exile, for instance, we should note the way that idolatry seems to be largely wiped out.

[18 : 38] There is not a general practice of idolatry after the return from exile. That sin, the sin that had heralded Israel being brought into exile, and then Judah, was largely eradicated.

Verses 21 following are largely a series of taunts against the land of Babylon. We've encountered several similar passages to this in the other oracles against the nations.

It focuses upon the humiliation of this once proud nation, and the way that the Lord is the one who is bringing her downfall. The Lord is opening up his armoury and equipping her enemies. The Lord is spurring them on to fight against her and to destroy and eradicate her.

The defeat of Babylon will be a demonstration of the vengeance of the Lord, a vengeance that will be declared in Jerusalem. The Lord is, among other things, avenging the destruction of his temple.

The enemies are summoned against Babylon and told to use their full force. We should bear in mind this prophecy against this cruel and violent people when we read the startling verses of Psalm 137 verses 8-9.

[19 : 40] O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us. Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock.

As in the case of other nations, the judgment upon Babylon is specifically associated with their pride. It is also a demonstration of the Lord's power against the predatory nations, the nations who think that they have Israel and Judah in their clutches and that they cannot get free.

But the Lord is their Redeemer, and he will deliver them. The presentation of the power of the Lord as the Redeemer of Israel and also his judgment against the proud nations that oppose him can be seen in Isaiah chapter 47 verses 4-11 too.

Our Redeemer, the Lord of hosts is his name, is the Holy One of Israel. Sit in silence and go into darkness, O daughter of the Chaldeans, for you shall no more be called the mistress of kingdoms.

I was angry with my people, I profaned my heritage, I gave them into your hand, you showed them no mercy, on the age you made your yoke exceedingly heavy. You said, I shall be mistress forever, so that you did not lay these things to heart or remember their end.

[20 : 50] Now therefore hear this, you lover of pleasures, who sit securely, who say in your heart, I am and there is no one besides me, I shall not sit as a widow or know the loss of children.

These two things shall come to you in a moment. In one day the loss of children and widowhood shall come upon you in full measure, in spite of your many sorceries and the great power of your enchantments.

You felt secure in your wickedness. You said, no one sees me. Your wisdom and knowledge led you astray, and you said in your heart, I am and there is no one besides me.

But evil shall come upon you, which you will not know how to charm away. Disaster shall fall upon you, for which you will not be able to atone, and ruin shall come upon you suddenly, of which you know nothing.

The proud will not survive long before the power of the Lord. The Lord delights to bring down the haughty. The Lord summons disaster upon the Babylonians, a personified sword that is directed to every single part of Babylonian society.

[21 : 52] Their inhabitants, the officials, the wise men, the Chaldeans, the diviners, the warriors, the horses and chariots, the foreign troops and mercenaries, and then against all her treasures.

Alongside the sword, the Lord summons a drought against her waters. She will be dried up. Her fertility will wither away. All of this ultimately comes upon Babylon, an account of its pride and its idolatry.

It's a land of images, and they are mad over idols. What will be left? A desolate wasteland populated by scavenging beasts. A place that will no more be populated.

A place that, like Sodom and Gomorrah, will stand as a signal of the Lord's judgment and his vengeance upon those who oppose him in pride. Verses 41 to 46, with which the chapter concludes, are surprising because they repeat verses that we found elsewhere in the book.

In Jeremiah chapter 6, verses 22 to 24, Thus says the Lord, Behold, a people is coming from the north country. A great nation is stirring from the farthest parts of the earth.

[22 : 54] They lay hold on bow and javelin. They are cruel and have no mercy. The sound of them is like the roaring sea. They ride on horses, set in array as a man for battle, against you, O daughter of Zion.

We have heard the report of it. Our hands fall helpless. Anguish has taken hold of us. Pain as of a woman in labor. That oracle was declared against Zion.

But now, the same words are being used against Babylon, the one who was acting out that judgment back in Jeremiah chapter 6. This reuse of former material is not accidental.

It is in its remixing of a form of prophecy, underlining the theological point. What Babylon has brought upon others, the Lord is bringing upon Babylon. We see the same thing in the prophecy that follows.

This is again a reworking of a former oracle that we find in chapter 49, verses 19 to 21. Behold, like a lion coming up from the jungle of the Jordan against a perennial pasture, I will suddenly make him run away from her, and I will appoint over her whomever I choose.

[23 : 59] For who is like me? Who will summon me? What shepherd can stand before me? Therefore hear the plan that the Lord has made against Edom, and the purposes that he has formed against the inhabitants of Teman.

Even the little ones of the flock shall be dragged away. Surely their foal shall be appalled at their fate. At the sound of their fall the earth shall tremble. The sound of their cry shall be heard at the Red Sea.

What Babylon brought upon Edom, Babylon herself will suffer at the hand of another nation. Babylon does not get the final word. The Lord will avenge himself upon her. A question to consider.

How does the delay of almost all the material declared against Babylon to this point in the book changed the way that we read the preceding prophecies and understand the place of Babylon within the theology of Jeremiah more generally?